

The Boy Who Finds Eleven by Genevie

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Summary:

“You're not afraid?”

“Why would I be afraid? You're my friend.”

“Still?”

“Yeah, still. For always.”

The Boy Who Finds Eleven

Mike becomes the Boy Who Cried Eleven.

He sees her in the broadcast static of a dead TV signal, hears her in the the screech of his walkie talkie whenever it encounters interference. Every slammed door is her, every snapped twig, every flickering light. She is every child with a buzz cut, every child with pale blonde hair.

He brings his friends all across Hawkins to find her, keeping them outside until their faces are red, and their boots are soaked through with snow, and their jackets stop holding back the cold. Then he drags them back out the next day, covering missed ground. “She’s out there somewhere,” he says in a voice so determined that he almost believes it himself, and nobody argues with him. Every damned one of them is aware that they wouldn’t be here if not for her.

At night, when there is less to hear and less to see, he stays awake into the early hours of the morning trying to come up with new places to search. His grades suffer and his health suffers and he suffers in such deep ways that he forgets how it feels not to carry this pain like a tumour in his belly.

It doesn’t bother him, though; he can take it. Wherever Eleven is, she is suffering worse.



When he does sleep, he has a dream. Singular: A dream, always the same.

It begins with him standing somewhere familiar—in his basement, or outside of the school, or in the forest—wearing only his pyjamas and a pair of slippers. It’s snowing; not much, but enough that his feet crunch against the ground. From somewhere nearby rises a soft, inhuman keening. He searches for its source but it flits around him like a hummingbird, never in one place long enough.

That doesn’t deter him from trying.

It occurs to him that maybe he should be afraid of whatever it is that's doing the keening, but he can't think of any reasons why. The dream does nothing to frighten him; in fact, it feels benevolent. Like something he can trust.

After spending what feels like hours taking spiralling routes all across town in places both familiar and strange, he finds himself in the same patch of forest. The air here feels like it's composed of billions of icy daggers slicing through his skin. It circles around him and when it whistles past his ears, a chill buries itself deep within his bones. He is shivering and tired and his steps become stumbling. Still, the dream does not feel ominous.

Off in the distance, he spots a small storage box with a sloped lid. When he sees it he thinks, *this has got to be why I'm here*, and he heads off in its direction. It's so cold, though, and he is exhausted. It seems a good idea to take a quick break and he curls up on the ground, holding his knees tight to his body.

He never finds out what's inside. This is where he wakes up.



"I'm telling you," he says, leaning forwards across the cafeteria table, waiting for his friends to lean closer, too, before he continues. "It isn't just a dream. It's something way bigger than that."

Dustin looks at Lucas, and Lucas looks at Dustin, and only Will is looking at Mike with a semblance of understanding, but it's hard to trust his face these days. He always seems to be wearing one mask or another, and there's a distant cast to his eyes, uncanny and unfocused, like he's still half-trapped in the upside-down. If he is understanding of anything, Mike thinks, it's that the more odd Mike seems, the more ordinary Will will come across as being.

"Mike, come on, man," Lucas says, poking at his fruit salad with a plastic spoon. "A dream?"

"Yeah, if dreams were real I'd be smooching Heather Johnson right now."

“Since when do you like Heather Johnson?”

“Uh, who doesn't like Heather Johnson?”

“Uh, me?”

“Okay, so that's Lucas confirmed for having no taste whatsoever. Will. Come on. Heather Johnson—a total ten out of ten, right?”

“I guess?”

“You guess? You *guess*? What is wrong with you people. Help me Mike-Wan Wheeler, you're my only hope.”

“No seriously guys, listen. I've had it almost every night for a while now and it always ends with me finding this box in the forest.”

Dustin leans back in his chair, defeated. “What's in the box?”

“I don't know, but I think Eleven wants me to find out.”

“So, what, she's trying to talk to you in your dreams now?”

“No, Lucas, it's more like...”

“Like E.T. and Elliot,” Will says. “Like you're connected.”

“Yeah, sort of. I mean, I don't feel her right now but I totally do in this dream. It's like she's right with me, the whole time, so I don't feel alone, or afraid, or anything like that.”

“Okay, so lets say you are connected,” Lucas says, seeming at least a little bit interested, now, though Mike knows it has nothing to do with him. Will's words hold more weight these days, as though surviving the upside-down has made him wiser, more credible. “What can you even do about it if the dream always ends before anything cool happens?”

That's the most frustrating thing. The lack of progress, the absence of agency. Mike is never going to get anywhere if the dream never changes, but how is he supposed to take control of it? Dreams don't work like that.

Then again, girls aren't supposed to work like Eleven does, either. People aren't supposed to work like her. Mike clings to her differences like they're the only thing keeping his head above above water, and he tells himself that they mean he'll always have a chance—that being the Boy Who Cried Eleven will one day make him the Boy Who Finds Eleven. “Right,” he says. “And I don't know yet. But I think we're getting close to finding her. Real close.”

“So, what can we do to help?” Will asks.

“Nothing. I think I have to do this alone. Or, well. I guess I need you guys to tell me that I don't sound completely crazy.”

“You sound a little crazy,” Lucas says.

“Totally freaking mental,” Dustin says, and Lucas elbows him, and Will's eyes shoot to Mike. “There's a but! I have a but. *But*, what the hell isn't mental about mind powers and shadow realms and being attacked by an actual, for real demogorgon?”

“Yeah,” Will says. “It'd be way more weird if you thought something normal was going to bring her back.”

Lucas finishes with, “So, it's crazy but it's the right kind of crazy,” and Mike hopes that his friends are right, that they're not just attempting to comfort him. They're running out of places to look, things to try, reasons to believe that she's still out there.

And he made a promise.

And friends don't say goodbye.



One night, he decides not to sleep at all.

It's the only thing he has left to try. He's read every book on lucid dreaming in the library, and he's spent hours going over the dream again and again in his mind in hopes that his subconscious will later follow his cues. Twice, he's taken some of his parents' rum thinking that maybe it would help, but all it did was make him feel a different kind of queasiness when he woke up in the morning.

Perched beside the window, he watches the wind swirl the snow across the ground and he thinks about whether or not Eleven got to experience winter at all before she escaped the laboratory, and whether or not she'd enjoy making snowmen and snow angels, or going sledding, or having a snowball fight. When he starts drifting off, he rests his forehead against the ice cold glass, hoping that the sensation of it will help him stay awake.

The keening rises at around three o'clock. Mike sits there, silent and still, listening to it for a few moments, trying to convince himself that it's real. It isn't like it is in the dream, vacillating from point to indeterminate point; instead, it moves in logical ways, beginning somewhere in the shadows behind his house, moving closer towards where the basement windows overlook the blanket fort. He tosses on his jacket over his pyjamas and shoves his feet clumsily into his boots, sneaking as quickly and as quietly outside as possible, not wanting to wake his family.

There's so much snow that he can't step anywhere without his feet crunching against the ground, so he forgoes making a quiet approach in favour of being quick. Rushing towards the basement window, he turns the corner just as the keening cuts out mid-cry.

Right ahead of him, crouched on the ground, is the demogorgon. The way it holds itself is stiff, defensive—head cocked, shoulders raised, arms and legs tensed as if it's about to sprint away—but it isn't looking at Mike, isn't sizing him up or gauging his position even from the corner of its eyes.

They stay like this for a while, neither one wanting to make the first move. Mike's heart is beating faster than he knew was possible and he wonders if the demogorgon can sense his fear through the changes in his blood flow. It's strange that it hasn't attacked him yet—that it is acting more like the prey to his predator than like a monster, pure and dark and evil. He thinks that maybe he knows why. He wishes that he didn't.

As if reading his mind, the demogorgon casts a single look over its shoulders before sprinting away, the keening rising from its throat again like a tortured wail.

Mike's knees threaten to buckle. His mind swirls like the snow.

The demogorgon has a face now.

Eleven's face.



This is what happens next:

Mike cries Eleven in a new way as he runs after her, calling out her name, alternating between *Eleven* and *El* as if one might be more likely than the other to stop her from running away from him. He shouts out that he misses her, that everything will be okay if she wants to come home. Pleads with her to come back, to just come back.

In this form, her limbs are so long. They are so strong. Granted inhuman speed she easily outpaces him, and it isn't long before she disappears completely from sight. Still running after her, Mike closes his eyes and tries to bring to mind his dream. *Like you're connected*, Will's voice echoes in his mind. His feet begin to guide him down the same looping paths he had taken in his sleep and he lets it happen, hoping beyond hope that it will bring him to Eleven.

The first thing he notices when he stops running is the storage box, covered in several inches of snow but still looking out of place against the rest of the forest. It's hard for him to believe that he's finally here, for real this time, conscious and aware and thinking freely, capable of making the decision to open the box—to actually find out what's inside of it.

Then he sees Eleven and he forgets that the box even exists.

She's standing some distance away, cloaked in the shadows of the trees, her back to Mike. If she realises that he's there, it doesn't show in the loose, tired ways in which she holds the demogorgon's body, or in the quiet keening rising from her as naturally as breathing. He's never thought of Eleven like a bird before—she is always the proud lion, the lone wolf, the protective mama bear. Now she seems like something he can startle; like something inclined to fly away from

him until she finds a patch of forest that he can't reach. Very slowly, very carefully, he walks inside of her fresh footprints. The leaves beneath them are wet from the snow; they sink under his weight but barely make a sound.

Once he is close enough, he begins to run, bent forward, aiming for the tackle, thinking that it's the only way to stop her from fleeing from him again. She notices him too late and they crumple to the ground together. This time, she doesn't try to escape, and he rolls away as soon as he catches his breath.

"Are you all right?" he asks. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Mike...", she says, her voice as soft as the layer of powder atop the snow but warmer, so much warmer that he feels a little less cold sitting here on the frozen ground.

"What happened, El? Why are you..." He can't finish the sentence. Why are you a demogorgon, why are you a monster, why are you like this—there's no way for him to phrase the latter part of his question without his words coming out barbed.

She looks at him, thinking. Then she raises her hands and interlocks her fingers. "Absorbed."

"So... the demogorgon is part of you now?"

"Yes."

"Forever?"

"I don't know."

"Is that why you ran away from me?"

"I'm the monster," she says, matter-of-factly, and the sound of her voice is so broken up by pain that Mike can feel it too, pulsing through his heart, kneading at his stomach, sitting hot and thick at the base of his throat.

"What? No. You're not a monster. You're a hero. Mine, and Dustin's, and Lucas', and Will's. You helped us even when it made you sick,

even when....” Again, he cuts himself off, this time because he's ashamed. She sacrificed herself when nobody else was strong enough to defeat the demogorgon. He can't think of anything less monstrous than that.

“You're not afraid?”

“Why would I be afraid? You're my friend.”

“Still?”

“Yeah, still. For always.”

“I don't want to go back.”

“Do you mean, to the upside-down?”

“Yes.”

“You won't have to, ever again. I promise.”

A smile lights up her face, softly and gently, like the glowing moon above them. It fades almost as quickly as it appears. “I can't stay,” she says, and she looks away, but not before Mike catches sight of the tears shimmering in her eyes.

“Why can't you?”

She only repeats herself; she can't stay.

“It's okay,” he says, “I can stay here with you.” Even if it's cold. Even if it's the middle of the night. Even if his parents are going to be so mad at him after all of this that they won't even be able to speak to him for days. What does any of that matter when Eleven is scared and alone and so close that he can reach out and take her hand? Which is exactly what he does; he takes her hand.

It's strange, sitting with the demogorgon like this, drawing comfort from its nearness. He tries to focus on Eleven's face—the only part of her which remains besides her mind, besides her heart—but even that is surrounded by petal-like protrusions, fleshy and raw, still clear in his memory as pieces of something fearsome and cruel. She starts

keening again and Mike wonders where from within her that sound comes now that he knows she still has her voice. Then he remembers what she had said earlier, that single, cold word: *absorbed*. He wonders if she feels more than just her own pain; if the original demogorgon was like her once, too, sweet and kind and strong and human.

Eleven breathes in a breath hitched on pain, and he asks, "What's wrong?"

"I can't feel it."

"What can't you feel?"

"Your hand."

"Not even a little?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not here."

Mike doesn't get it at first. She feels every bit as real and as present as he does. Her hand is solid in his; her breath appears as little puffs of fog in the air. He hears her voice as sure as anything, smells the musty scent of the demogorgon's flesh wafting off of her with the heat that rises from her body.

Then he thinks about how thoroughly he and his friends searched for her without finding a single trace of her presence—not a footprint in the snow, or a trail of mucous pulled along the ground, or a lingering smell, or the soft sound of her keening drifting through the forest. If she was by his house tonight, then maybe she's been by more than once—maybe the reason why he's heard her so often in his dreams is because the sound was real, slipping into his ears while he slept. Yet in the morning, there was never any sign that she had been there.

He looks behind him. Her footprints are gone, replaced by his own.

"I'm the only one who can see you."

“Connected,” she says, just as Will had said, and Mike wonders if there's a deeper meaning behind them both using the same word. Just as Will was something that Joyce felt in the lights, innately, Eleven is something that Mike feels when his eyes are closed, and when his senses are dimmed, and when she's nearby and he knows exactly where to look for her.

“Close your eyes,” he says, tightening his grip on her hand. She does. “Now, imagine that I'm holding your hand, okay? And imagine that you're holding mine back.”

Her hand is limp in his. Recalling his mother's touch, he runs his thumb along the base of Eleven's, hoping that it'll bring her some comfort when she does feel him because he doesn't want to believe that anything else is possible—doesn't even want to consider that Eleven might be forever locked into this body, here but not here, alone even when he's right beside her, holding her hand.

Nothing happens for a while. Then, slowly, the places where his thumb brushes against her begin to turn a fleshy pink, as if he's erasing away the demogorgon's skin. When he pulls his hand back, startled, small flakes of grey fall to the ground like snow.

“Mike?”

“Can you feel that?”

“Yes.”

He wraps both of her hands in his, making sure to at least graze everything from her wrists to the claws at the tips of her fingers. It isn't long before he's holding her two human hands in his two human hands. The demogorgon skin keeps sloughing off in chunks and her own skin rises higher and higher up her arms.

She's still wearing the blue jacket he'd given her.

Reaching towards the petals blooming around her face, he runs a finger along their connecting edges, watching as they fall off one by one. “El,” he says, and she looks up at him with so much surprise and hope and admiration shining behind her tears that he can't help but

pull her into an excited hug. “Close your eyes again.”

The feeling of her shifting and shrinking in his arms is odd, uncomfortable. There's demogorgon skin hanging off of him, heavy and wet, stinking with a putrid, metallic stench so thick that he can taste it at the back of his throat. He feels like he's going to be sick but holds back the urge. He wants to be strong for Eleven, who's shaking in his arms, the strain of changing taking its toll. He adjusts his grip on her, refusing to let go, even a little bit, until whatever is happening to her has run its course.

When the shifting finally stops, all they are is two children—two friends—comforting each other in the middle of a forest, connected in ways that neither of them will ever understand. That's all right, though. Not everything needs to be explained.



It isn't a good fire, but it's the best they can manage; Eleven's powers are enough to topple a tree so they can collect some dry wood, but they're useless when it comes to stoking the flames. She's wearing Mike's winter jacket now, too, and he's sitting beside her, pretending that his pyjamas and the fire are warm enough to keep the cold from being painful. The rising sun provides a small amount of warmth, but it also makes him think about his parents. He hopes they haven't realised that he's gone yet, hopes that they won't have to spend too much time worrying over where he could be.

“Soon,” Eleven says.

“You're absolutely certain that he'll come?”

“He always comes. Like Mike.”

He leans against her, shoulder to shoulder, head to head, and she presses a bit of her weight into him, too. There's a tremble to her body, softer and more quiet than a simple chill, and he wonders what else she has absorbed into her, not just during her time as a demogorgon but throughout her whole entire life.

It's a while, still, before they hear the sound of footsteps approaching

through forest. Soon after that, they can see the first hints of a flashlight pointed towards them, barely needed now that the sun is higher in the sky. Hopper takes one look at them, curses, *Jesus*, barely under his breath, and doesn't ask them a single question. Instead, he says, "Come on, let's go get you two warmed up," and he removes his jacket, handing it off to them. Mike slips an arm into his side of the jacket and Eleven slips an arm into the other, and they walk hand-in-hand back to Hopper's blazer.

"Home," Eleven says, and Mike nods.

"Home for good."